

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

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Recap of March/April 2021 Conversations about Proactivity with Tom Bateman

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

During March and April, we discussed proactivity at work with Thomas S. Bateman, Bank of America Eminent Scholar Emeritus, UVA McIntire School of Commerce, who has done a lot of work in self-directed leadership and behavior that is proactive rather than reactive. On his Twitter profile, he goes so far as to say that “proaction is the great superpower.” He’s written an interesting Psychology Today article, “[Why Proactivity Is the Superpower You Can and Should Develop.](#)”

Everything said by Tom Bateman is left-justified. Comments by other participants are indented.

3/23/21 session

Slides used in the first session are available [here](#). The high-level capture of discussion that follows will make more sense if you have them open.

We have a longstanding crisis of leadership. There is a supply-demand imbalance.

My pet peeve is statements like, “The key to leadership,” and so on – the idea that there is one right answer that can be bottled and served up.

I’m reluctant to move into the SES. Maybe I can be more effective at the GS-15 level.

Some employees will never be happy with their leaders – it’s muddy (from an executive in the room).

Is some of the problem that you’re being torn from above and below?

Leaders are developed. The born/made discussion is passive. There’s a third option: leaders can take it upon themselves to develop themselves.

On charisma, people can be competent without being charismatic. Not having a vision takes away from charisma. These things can add to charisma: A person who decides to recognize people as unique individuals. A person who takes action.

See the leadership problem-solving model in slide #3. (It's not enough to act; how will you decide what to do?). Tom went over President Bush’s decision-making process during 9/11 (more at [Launching the War on Terrorism](#), a Harvard Business School case). Bush was reading to school kids when he got the word, then spent the next couple of weeks talking to his cabinet. Tom contrasted the Iraq War decision-making process a couple of

years later, which went straight to step 4, with the result that more mistakes were made; “a solution was waiting for the right moment.” (A participant mentioned Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet, here.)

So many leaders shortchange the relationship aspect. If everyone in the meeting gets heard, everyone will support the decision afterward. If some people don't buy in, the leader's credibility suffers.

Proactivity is not about “not procrastinating.” It is about strategic thinking and action.

One participant has used Stephen R. Covey's The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People with a group she's mentoring. Proactivity is the 1st habit, the foundation for all the other ones.

Another is bothered by reactivity and thinks it should be avoided. She thinks in terms of “proble-tunities” – creating something where nothing existed before.

4/28/21 session

Tom shared an anecdote famous among economists, said to be true: Traffic on a 2-lane highway is at a crawl for an hour. The holdup is a mattress in the middle of the road. Instead of someone's stopping to drag it to the side of the road, each car reaches the obstacle and creeps around it, then accelerates to normal speed. This is classic economics: there's no incentive to remove the mattress. Tom's alternate interpretation: most people aren't very proactive – they go with the flow.

One example of proaction is **Voice**: free choice; taking action. People self-censor. There are sacred cows – should we slay them? Tom gave the group 30 seconds to come up with examples, then asked participants to share.

Years ago, I led a “What works well/Doesn’t work well” task analyzing the Federal Railroad Administration. I “sold” employee voice to my SES’ers. The resultant process broke through silos and turf issues. It changed 75% of the things that weren’t working well.

I used to try to notice who was missing in a meeting; asked questions so others would notice they hadn’t been included. E.g., “What about xyz? Would s(he) be a good fit for that job?” A current term for this is Ally.

We experienced a huge breach of trust and total loss of psychological safety that occurred when our CEO short-circuited a hiring process that had been delegated to the tech team. This upset people so much that at least 15 people left in the next month. The original team of 55 people lost 35 total; the remainder were in visa and health situations that prevented them from leaving.

I’ve spoken up numerous times in relation to leadership development that’s not happening. Developing and growing leaders creates a pipeline. This isn’t happening, so people are shutting down and leaving. Leaders have to hear and then act or it destroys trust. Lip service destroys trust.

The group touched on a couple of aspects of psychological safety, which was seen as another reason people don’t exercise voice:

- Sometimes it can become necessary to exercise voice whether or not it feels safe to speak up, especially if we feel prevented from serving the public. How much can I stomach before I have to speak up or leave?
- Tact plays a role in psychological safety:
 - Make your feedback about the task, not the person.
 - You have to self-govern in order to contribute to making the space safe.

Psychological safety reminds Tom of “groupthink” from the 60’s. There are personality and situational components.

Our Finnish participant described a consulting gig in which the group has been all talk and no action for six months. Some aspects of the context are different, including that the enterprise is a monopoly. There may be some follow-on discussion between Helsinki and a DC participant about this.

Resilience and courage can be developed.

Personality traits can be developed, as can proactivity. It’s more fruitful to think in terms of behaviors and getting outside of one’s comfort zone.

The behaviors of proactivity are the essence of change leadership. What matters is how the leader operates.

Think about you as an employee **and** you as a boss. Also think about:

- Strategies and tactics
- Motivators and Inhibitors
- Up/down/sideways communications

Decide on one action you want to take, when, and with whom.

Participant affiliations

2021 ASPA Founders’ Fellow
ASPA National Capital Area Chapter
BM Martin Solutions
Charlestown, RI Town Council
Colorado Federal Executive Board
Dell Technologies
Department of Education

Department of Energy
Department of Homeland Security
Eyes Up Appalachia
Healthify
Network Management Consultant
Securities and Exchange Commission
University of Virginia
U.S. Army

Participants joined from Pullman, WA, Menlo Park, CA, Denver and Colorado Springs, CO, New Orleans, LA, Columbus, OH, Wickford, RI, Rockport, ME, Bucheon, South Korea, Helsinki, Finland, and the DC Metro Area.

We noticed interesting overlaps in participant and presenter knowledge and project experience. This happens every time. Aside from making everyone feel welcome, eliciting those connections is why our sessions always begin with a round of introductions. That's also why participants are sent everyone else's email address after each event. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,
Kitty Wooley

Header photo: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kayakers_in_Redwood_City,_California.jpg